

ARE WE OWNED BY THE NOSTRUMS?

Some of our members who attended the Portland meeting of the American Medical Association, will remember that Dr. Frank Billings, of Chicago, read a paper before the section on medicine on the subject of the abuses of the proprietary medicine business, which attracted some attention. We understand that the Association was threatened with legal action in case the paper should be published. Agreeably to the wishes of the *Journal A. M. A.*, the President of the Association of State Medical Journals corresponded with the editors of such journals with a view to arranging for simultaneous publication of this paper in the *Journal A. M. A.* and a number of the State journals. Some person into whose hands this correspondence has fallen, seems to have been good enough to place it before one of the nostrum manufacturers mentioned by Dr. Billings, for we have recently received letters which we take pleasure in publishing below. (Vide infra.)

Dr. Billings' remarks relating to phenalgin were based upon a report of the Committee on Chemistry of the Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry of the A. M. A., which report gave analyses of this article showing it to be composed of acetanilid 57, sodium bicarb. 29, ammonium carb. 10. This report was signed by J. H. Long, Prof. of Chemistry in the Northwestern University Medical School, W. A. Puckner, Prof. of Chemistry in the School of Pharmacy of the University of Illinois, S. P. Sadtler, Prof. of Chemistry in the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy, Julius Steiglitz, Prof. of Chemistry in the University of Chicago, H. W. Wiley, Chief of the Bureau of Chemistry of the Department of Agriculture, and Max D. Slimmer, Ph. D.

It may be safely assumed that the findings of the committee were accurate and that nothing but the truth has been said. Are we then to be held up by this nostrum manufacturer and prevented from telling the truth about the things which we are being urged, through the advertising pages of a venal medical press, to use as medicines?

New York, U. S. A., November 10, 1905.

Editor CALIFORNIA STATE JOURNAL OF MEDICINE, San Francisco, Cal. Dear Doctor: We understand that the article read by Dr. Frank Billings of Chicago, Ill., at the Portland meeting of the American Medical Association, last July, entitled "The Secret Nostrum Evil," is being sent out to a number of medical journals for publication, although it has not as yet appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* of Chicago, Illinois. The enclosed copy of a letter from our attorney, Bartow S. Weeks, of New York, to Dr. George H. Simmons, editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, will be interesting in this connection. Yours truly,

ETNA CHEMICAL COMPANY.

Per ALLEN H. STILL,
Secretary and General Manager.

BARTOW S. WEEKS,
Attorney and Counselor at Law,
170 Broadway, New York.

August 8, 1905.

The *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Dr. George H. Simmons, Editor, 103 Dearborn Avenue, Chicago, Ill. Dear Sir: On behalf of the Etna Chemical Company, proprietors and manufacturers of "Phenalgin," I write to call your attention to an article by Dr. Frank Billings, entitled "The Secret Nostrum Evil," read before the American Medical Association at its last meeting, at Portland, Oregon, referring to the said preparation "Phenalgin" in a manner indicating that it was a quack remedy, and improper to be prescribed by physicians. The publication in your *Journal* of any such reference to

"Phenalgin" I have advised my client would be libelous and not privileged.

I am also advised that you intend publishing a book containing formulæ in which mention is to be made of "Phenalgin." The publication of any alleged formulæ of "Phenalgin" in said book of formulæ, would be an infringement of the right of my client.

I write you therefore, to request that, in the publication of the proceedings of the Association, and in your book of formulæ, you omit entirely the name "Phenalgin," thereby avoiding the necessity for legal proceedings on this account.

Trusting to hear from you that you will refrain from the publication of any reference to "Phenalgin," as indicated, I beg to remain, Yours truly,
(Signed) BARTOW S. WEEKS.

THE SECRET NOSTRUM EVIL.*

By FRANK BILLINGS, M. D., Chicago.

I SHALL make no apology for bringing this subject before this section. Its importance to the profession of medicine and to the public justifies an exposition of the evil now. In no other country has this menace to the welfare of the people and to the best interests of scientific medicine developed as it has with us.

Probably the reason is that other countries, with one or two exceptions, protect the people against frauds in foods, medicines, etc.

Some day it is to be hoped that the Congress of the United States will enact a national pure food law which shall include the regulation of the copyrighting and exploitation of proprietary and other medicines.

Just here it will be well to say that the term "proprietary medicine" does not necessarily stamp a preparation or remedy as a nostrum. Webster says that a nostrum is "a medicine, the ingredients of which are kept secret for the purpose of restricting the profits of sale to the inventor or proprietor; a quack medicine." Some proprietary medicines are patented, or better, the process of manufacturing an article is patented. This patent protects the discoverer, or owner, in the manufacture of the medicine or drug for a period of 17 years. These preparations are ethical, in that they are not secret, for any one for a small fee may obtain from the patent office of the government a copy of the description of the process of manufacture and the actual chemical composition of any such patented drug or remedy. The chief harm which has come to us in America from the protection by patent of the process of making a chemical or drug has been the resulting high price of the product. Many of the synthetic chemical drugs, like antipyrin, phenacetin, etc., cost ten times their worth as compared with the price of the same drugs in Germany and in other countries. As stated, however, such really patented preparations are not secret; the composition is known. Some of them are of value therapeutically. Many of them are valueless. Some of them are harmful. Most of them we could easily get on without and fare better with the older, more simple remedies. Too many "made in Germany" specifics are shoved under our noses.

Now, as to the other proprietary medicines. All the so-called "patent medicines" put on the market for the public, and many of the preparations exploited to physicians and distributed by them to the public, are not patented, but are protected by a copyright or trade mark. Technically there is no difference between the secret proprietary medicines manufactured for physicians' use and the "patent medicines" exploited to the public. Both are protected by a copyright or trade mark name. Both are protected for an indefinite time. They are mixtures, as a rule, of several ingredients.

The relation of the physician to these preparations, however, is very different. Those "patent medi-

*Read in the Section on Practice of Medicine of the American Medical Association, at the Fifty-sixth Annual Session, July, 1905.

cines" which are advertised to the public are not considered ethical, and physicians abhor them and rightly condemn their use because they are often dangerous and always irrational as remedies. On the other hand, the manufacturers of those copyrighted proprietary medicines which are exploited to physicians by extravagant claims of specific therapeutic action, use the doctor as the middle man to distribute the cure-alls to the public.

Medicines so prepared that the busy physician could easily dispense them found a certain class of doctors eager to use them. The indications for use appeared on the label or in the accompanying literature. Tonics, blood and tissue builders, emenagogues, pain relievers, febrifuges, laxatives, calculi dissolvers, soporifics, bile promoters, heart tonics, cures for Bright's disease, etc., have appeared in countless number, and some remedies offered are confidently presented as cures for not one, but a half dozen diseases or symptoms complex. Indeed, the claims of many of the promoters of this class of remedies do not differ in extravagance from the cure-all patent medicines offered directly to the public.

It has been easy to obtain testimonials of the alleged value of many of these remedies. Many even of the "faculty" have extolled them. Why, therefore, should not the less experienced physician use these "elegant," palatable, all-ready-to-use, with label-specifying-dose, disease-indicating remedies? Prominent physicians and the "faculty" had testimonials in the circulars sent with the samples indicating the virtues; why, therefore, use the simple proved remedies of the pharmacopeia, and especially as the latter would often necessitate the trouble of writing a real prescription?

To the rational physician most of the mixtures, even with the formulæ, are objectionable. Disease is never quite the same in different individuals, nor does the picture remain the same from day to day. The treatment must be modified to meet the varying problem of the morbid process. Rational therapy calls for simple prescriptions; but if there be an objection to mixtures with fixed and known formulæ, what must one say of mixtures of secret or semi-secret composition?

As Dr. Horatio C. Wood, Jr.,¹ says:

A much more elusive and therefore dangerous evil lurks in the class of mixtures which attempt to cloak their secrecy with a deceptive show of frankness. I think you will grant that the physician is rarely justified in the use of remedies concerning which he has no knowledge, and I maintain that the publication by a drug firm, of whose integrity the physician is absolutely ignorant, of a professed list of ingredients of some mixture is not sufficient knowledge to pardon or to warrant the uses of that remedy. In the first place, if the published formula be correct, it is not enough to know simply the composition of a mixture, the exact quantities must also be known; there is a vast difference between the effects of 1 grain and of 100 grains of opium. Moreover, there is no means of knowing that the formula is a true one, for many of these corporations do not hesitate to pervert the truth.

Many of the promoters of these preparations claim, as chemists or as pharmacists, to be the discoverers of the wonderful remedies and the alleged unusual knowledge of chemistry or of skill in pharmacy has enabled the discoverer to develop in a mixture heretofore unknown, therapeutic qualities. Truth to tell, however, it is known that the proprietors are not always the manufacturers of the preparations they exploit and distribute. Many of the proprietary preparations are made by the large manufacturing pharmacists for the owners. Pharmaceutical skill is doubtless used in these instances, but it is the kind of skill which is for sale and is not personal.

I am informed that it is not unusual for one manufacturer of proprietary mixtures to have several so-called "companies," through which he can more easily exploit and distribute his products.

There is said to be a direct relation between the Dad Chemical Co., the Od Chemical Co., the Sultan Drug Co., the Rio Chemical Co., and the Peacock Chemical Co., or at least that they are linked to-

gether through one individual, and that Battle & Co. and the Lambert Pharmacal Co. are related to the above list. It is said, too, that the Vass Chemical Co., the Lotos Chemical Co. and the Valley Chemical Co. are one combination. Doubtless other combinations exist.

Curiosity recently prompted me to look through a number of medical journals, and I cannot resist the temptation to quote some of the preparations advertised in them: Aletris Cordial, Celerina, Neurilla, Respiton, San Metto, Cactina Pellets, Seng, Chionia, Thialion, Zarcol, Echthol, Hagee's Cordial of Cod Liver Oil Compound, Mandragorine Tablets, Rheumagon, Ponca Compound, Ammophenin, Chloro-Bromon, Anasarcin, Bronchiline, Zematol, Zymotidine, Sulphogen, Labordine, Satyria, Manola, Cacodol, Eusoma, Leprosen, Sulpho-Naphtol, Pasavena, Neurosine, Germiletum, Bonn's Passiflora Tablets, Dioburnia, Tongaline, Lithiated Hydrangea, Melachol, Gonoseptone, Calicolo, Solusul, Saliodin, and so on *ad infinitum*. These are only a few samples of what the physicians of the United States are asked to prescribe. But there are hundreds of secret preparations that are not advertised in medical journals, whose literature and samples come to us through the mails, etc. In the majority of cases, we do not know their contents, and in many instances an analysis shows that they are simply mixtures. Often a prescription written by a physician for a particular case is purloined, put up under a trade name and exploited as a cure-all.

As an illustration see the official announcement of the Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry regarding certain nostrums that have been exploited as synthetic chemical preparations guaranteed to cure everything I have no doubt that the majority of the physicians who have been prescribing phenalgin, antikamnia, sal-codeia (Bell), and ammonol were shocked when they found out that, according to the analyses, they had been giving a simple mixture of acetanilid, with bicarbonate or salicylate of sodium or carbonate of ammonium, with a little caffeine in some instances. What physician will be foolish enough to use these preparations, when he can get the same of his druggist for at most one-tenth the cost, but especially what physician with a particle of medical knowledge would think of giving acetanilid if he knew it, in the majority of the conditions in which, according to the advertisers, these nostrums are indicated?

What physician would prescribe Gray's glycerin tonic, if he knew that its chief ingredients are gentian, dandelion, glycerin and sherry wine?² Could he not write a prescription as good and feel that he was his own judge of what constitutes a tonic?

Let me quote from the *Journal A. M. A.*³ This, I am told, refers to an article advertised as a codliver oil preparation—one of the tasteless kind, that has been investigated by a sub-committee of the Council:

We have recently had occasion to open a package of a well-known "Tasteless Cod Liver Oil" preparation. The circular which was wrapped about the bottle was replete with interesting information, especially for the patient, who obtains the remedy in the original package, as prescribed by his physician. He finds in it a list of the diseases in which the preparation does wonders—they range from the dread consumption to cystitis and hemorrhage of the kidney. Most interesting to us, however, is the statement that this compound "contains all the necessary elements of nutrition." It is too bad to disturb this beautiful vision by the report of the chemist. This shows that the product is quite free from oil or proteins; the only nutrient ingredients are alcohol, sugar, and perhaps glycerin. But the claims of the manufacturers are probably correct, for it contains carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and probably a trace of nitrogen—so does gunpowder.

Perhaps it will now be the turn of strychnin to be advertised as the ideal food. It seems superfluous to point out the moral of this tale.

It is not necessary to enter into a discussion as to whether we should ever prescribe secret proprietary medicines, for in the minds of intelligent men, even with only a smattering of medical knowledge, there

²"Each half ounce is stated to contain dilute phosphoric acid, 12 minims; gentian root, 10 grains; extract of taraxacum, 15 grains; glycerin, 80 minims; sherry wine, 80 minims; carminatives, q. s."—"Thesaurus of Proprietary Remedies," p. 148.

³June 17, 1905, p. 1943.

¹"Proprietary Therapeutics," *The Journal A. M. A.*, June 10, 1905, p. 1826.

can be but one answer. A physician who has a true appreciation of his responsibilities, who has even ordinary knowledge of the action of drugs, and the danger from their unintelligent use, would not think of prescribing for the sick, who have placed themselves under his care, a preparation about which he knows nothing except what the manufacturer, about whom he knows less, had told him. While there is no excuse for prescribing these medicines, too many unthinking physicians are influenced to do so by the claptrap designated "literature," which the exploiters publish about their preparations.

There is not a secret proprietary preparation that has any more value, from a pharmaceutical or therapeutic standpoint than has the ordinary prescription of the average general practitioner. Stop advertising them and they would be forgotten, just as "patent medicines" pass away if they are not advertised. A hark back 10 or 15 years will call to mind many concoctions which physicians were asked to prescribe, and which, according to the advertisements, performed wonders, but now are heard of no more. Their advertising literature stopped coming and the nostrum-prescribing doctor ceased to use them.

What is the cause of the nostrum evil? There are several.

1. Pharmacology and therapeutics are neglected relatively by many of our medical schools. Anatomy, physiology, pathology, diagnosis, etc., are emphasized and too often the usefulness and limitations of drugs are neglected. Too frequently drug nihilism is taught. If the student were fully taught the physiologic action of drugs, the art of prescribing, preferably single remedies or in the simple combination, using if he desires pharmacopoeial preparations prepared by reliable manufacturing pharmacists, and at the same time if he were taught when not to rely on drugs, but frankly to prescribe for his patient a course of hygienic measures which alone would accomplish all that would be required, he would not be the willing dupe of the nostrum vendor, as he now is.

2. The reputable manufacturing pharmacists deserve great credit for the improvement they have made in pharmaceutical products. They have afforded us official preparations in the form of pills, tablets, syrups, tinctures, extracts, etc., which are elegant in appearance, often palatable and usually potent.

For this advance in pharmacy, a distinct credit to our country, we owe them our thanks.

Unfortunately, many of them have not stopped at this point, but have manufactured their own special mixtures, which are just as objectionable as the products of the special manufacturers. They, too, have been active with their agents in visiting physicians and in distributing "literature." This encourages drug-giving in specific mixtures for special symptoms, and is wrong. With one hand they do good work, with the other much evil is done.

3. The nostrum makers at first copied the methods of the reliable manufacturing chemists, in exploiting their products, but they have gone a step farther and have reached a point where one may say that they have subsidized the medical press. I know I am on dangerous ground when I make this statement, but right here is the chief cause—and the remedy. How many of our so-called medical journals are subsidized by medicine manufacturers I do not know, but all physicians know as well as I that there are many, and I do not refer to the so-called house organs. I unhesitatingly affirm that one-half of the medical journals of the country would be out of existence if it were not for the nostrum advertisements. Under the circumstances, therefore, can we expect these journals to say anything? Need we be surprised that scarcely a journal published the official report regarding the acetanilid mixtures, when the preparations hit were the best paying advertisements in the country?

What is the remedy? Publicity. The enlightenment of the profession. The truth regarding not only

what the preparations contain, but who makes them. Certainly no honest manufacturer will object to this last proposition, and no honest physician will put up with less than the former.

The Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry has been created to investigate the non-official preparations, to find out the truth about them, and to publish its findings. It is not necessary to repeat here the results of the work already done by this body. All physicians have read, or may read all about it. In my opinion there has been no movement undertaken by the American Medical Association that will be so far reaching as this one to rid us of the blight of the nostrum evil. For the first time, we see the possibility of the elimination of a part, at least, of this curse to American medicine. It is the first practical solution offered of a most difficult problem.

But—and I want to emphasize what I am about to say—the movement will have the most determined opposition that money can bring. Millions are being made annually by the nostrum manufacturers, and they will not sit idly by and see this wealth-producing business done away with if they can prevent it. It won't be an open fight, for their business will not stand publicity. They will have with them those so-called medical journals which are published solely in their interests.

This movement will have the sympathy of every thinking physician of the country, but sympathy does not win battles. In this fight those who are representing us should have all the support we can give. In society meetings especially we should aid in the propaganda by helping to enlighten and to interest those of our profession who have given the matter no thought. We should support those journals that represent us, and not tolerate in our offices those that we know to be subsidized and to represent their advertisers rather than their readers.

Explain to your friends and patients that practically every newspaper in the United States is a silent partner in the nostrum fraud business. That it is bound to silence and to aid in defrauding the people into using alcoholic nostrums by the following clauses in its advertising contracts with the nostrum trust:

- 1st. It is agreed in case any law or laws are enacted, either State or National, harmful to the interests of the (Nostrum Manufacturing Co.), that this contract may be cancelled by them from date of such enactment, and the insertions paid for pro rata with the contract price.

- 2d. It is agreed that the (Nostrum Manufacturing Co.) may cancel this contract pro rata in case advertisements are published in this paper, in which their products are offered, with a view to substitution or other harmful motive; also, in case any matter otherwise detrimental to the (Nostrum Manufacturing Co.'s) interests is permitted to appear in the reading columns or elsewhere in this paper.

(See *Collier's Weekly*, Nov. 4, 1905.)

Originally all lepers in Norway were confined to institutions. At the present time, however, only indigent lepers and those who can not be suitably cared for at home are required to enter an asylum, where they live under the best hygienic conditions. Other patients are allowed to remain at home, with the understanding that they sleep alone and, if possible, have separate rooms, that their clothing, linen and eating utensils be used by no one else, and that proper precautions be taken in the washing of linen. Dressings and bandages must be burned. Under these regulations the number of lepers in Norway has decreased from 2,870 in 1856 to 577 in 1900. Banishment to a particular island is practiced in the Sandwich Islands. Segregation of lepers should be brought about in this country.—*Journal A. M. A.*